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SUBJECT: PREPARING FOR THE REFERENDUM IN NORTHEASTERN  
THAILAND

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. While the Bangkok elite are heavily focused on the draft constitution and preparations for the September referendum, voters in the poor, rural northeast are not. Indeed, while some local officials are attempting to build public support for the draft charter in the countryside, their activities do not appear to have produced much success. Instead, both elected and NGO leaders in the northeastern province of Ubon Ratchatani judge that the powerful patronage networks of provincial politicians--most importantly current and former members of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party--will play the most important role in directing people how to vote. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Poloffs traveled to the northeastern (Isaan) province of Ubon Ratchatani May 2-3 to discuss local political sentiment and preparations for the September constitutional referendum with local contacts. Ubon, which borders Laos and Cambodia, is the eastern-most province in Thailand and serves as an administrative and commercial hub for Isaan. While still dominated by agriculture, Ubon is relatively well-off when compared to other northeastern provinces. Ubon has the fourth largest number of voters in the country, and in the 2005 parliamentary election, 64 percent supported candidates from deposed PM Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party. Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont traveled to Ubon April 21 to build support for his government and listen to local concerns. Septel will outline political dynamics in Ubon and local reaction to the PM's trip.

PREPARING FOR THE REFERENDUM  
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¶3. (C) In a meeting with poloffs on May 3, Wichai Sangsri, Secretary of the Ad Hoc Committee on Public Opinion and

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People's Participation--the group charged with educating the public on the draft charter--outlined a process that appears more focused on soliciting feedback from local elite than educating voters on the new constitution. Wichai explained that his 21-member committee had been selected by local representatives to the 1000 member Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA) in Bangkok. In phase one of the process, this 21-member body had studied the draft constitution, focusing in particular on the differences between this charter and the 1997 constitution.

¶4. (C) Wichai explained that his group was now engaged in

phase two of the process, holding public hearings on the draft charter to solicit feedback. His committee has held two rounds of these hearings so far: each round entails six separate locations with 2-300 participants at each. These sessions last all day. Participants are selected based on 13 different professions, including agriculture, local businesses, government workers and security officials. These representatives are then given a handbook outlining the 15 major differences between the draft charter and the 1997 constitution. Wichai admitted that the first round of public hearings took place before the full text of the draft charter was publicly released. Feedback from each public hearing is organized by the Ad Hoc Committee and forwarded to the CDA in Bangkok. According to Wichai, the top three subjects of discussion at the public forums have been: new limits on the authority of elected representatives, larger voter constituencies and expanded oversight of government officials. Wichai emphasized that the public hearing campaign is designed to educate the crucial five percent of citizens who are leaders in their communities. Conducting forums at the village level, in his opinion, is not feasible, given the breadth of the countryside and short period of time before the vote.

15. (C) Wichai was less confident when he described plans for phase three: educating the population on the finalized charter ahead of the September referendum. The plan and budget for phase three have not yet been finalized. When pushed, Wichai admitted that he does not expect to hold any more public hearings on the charter. Instead, his committee will likely focus on using local media to raise public awareness of the draft constitution.

16. (C) Wichai is guardedly optimistic that the referendum will pass. In his view, the new constitution will strengthen the people at the cost of politicians, and participants at the public hearings he has organized agree with this approach. The problem, according to Wichai, is that most

people in the countryside do not think about national-level politics, and those that do want to know how the new constitution will benefit them. In a comment echoed by all of our contacts in Ubon, Wichai emphasized that the support of local leaders--village and district headmen--will be crucial to the charter's passage.

17. (C) In a separate meeting, Ubon Governor Sutee Markboon gave a less-detailed, though complimentary, brief on preparations for the referendum. Sutee professed optimism on the referendum's passage, with one of his Vice Governors adding that local citizens are looking forward to elections in December. Sutee also expressed confidence in the ability of the Ad Hoc community to use local media to build public support for the draft charter. Later on the same day, officials from the Ubon election commission--who will actually administer the referendum--explained that preparations for the vote are already under way. Although this is the first national referendum in Thai history, election officials noted that they will use the same administrative set-up used in national and local elections and foresee no major problems.

FALLING ON DEAF EARS?  
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18. (C) A range of contacts from local NGOs and local administrative organizations painted a much different picture on the draft charter. Several village-level leaders described a rural population focused on local concerns and basic subsistence, uninterested and barely informed on national level politics. Somparn Kuendee, Coordinator for the Assembly of the Poor's Pak Mun Damn Community, a local grass-roots NGO, said that "these are big subjects, politics, laws...poor people don't even think about these things." At a roundtable of village headmen, organized by Saman Taweessri, Chairman of the Village and District Headman Association, one village chief complained how hard it was to follow these subjects, "we don't have the education or training," to deal

with these issues. "Most people don't talk about it." Local leaders are "confused" on the subject. According to this group of headmen, village leaders like themselves attend these mandatory public forums organized by the Ad Hoc Committee, but come away with little confidence in their understanding of the draft charter.

¶9. (C) Even more well-informed local leaders admitted that they are struggling to understand the draft constitution. Pongsak Saiwan, Coordinator for the Ubon Community Network, another grass roots NGO, said that he had been following press reports on the new constitution and proudly produced a dog-eared, pocket-sized copy of the 1997 charter. A big part of his job, he said, was advising local people on their rights under the constitution and building increased political consciousness. Pongsak said that his group is very much focused on the potential expansion and protection of specific individual and community rights in the new charter, but expressed frustration that his group had not yet received a copy of the current draft. Contrary to assertions of public disinterest in the new constitution, Pongsak said that "people are interested, but uninformed."

#### WHAT MATTERS IN THE END

¶10. (C) While unwilling to offer predictions on the outcome of the referendum, all of these local leaders agreed that the passage or failure of the draft charter in Ubon will depend on the support of village and district headmen. According to one village headman, "people vote as ordered, good or not, that's the way it is." When asked how local leaders will decide which way to direct their people to vote, another headman explained that, in Ubon, province-level political leaders will make the decision, based on guidance from their national political party. According to this account, party decisions on the referendum easily trump central government guidance. "The government cannot compete with the party." These local officials say that they have no guidance from senior politicians on the charter yet.

#### COMMENT

¶11. (C) While politicians and academics in Bangkok are threatening that the constitution is "doomed," the majority of voters in rural areas seem genuinely undecided. In an

eerie analytic echo, both a university professor and a village headman with a high-school education labeled the key political dynamic behind the success or failure of the referendum as "feudal." Whatever its label, it is not clear whether central government officials in Bangkok recognize that their current efforts to sell the draft charter in the countryside are not yet bearing fruit. Then again, as several of our contacts asked, since when have the leaders in Bangkok cared about what the people in Ubon think?

BOYCE